



CONVERSATION WITH GENE YOUNGBLOOD

The author of 'Expanded Cinema' explains why his interests have shifted from film to electronic media, and talks about his new books

Whatever happened to Gene Youngblood? His 1970 book, *Expanded Cinema*, broke new ground in film criticism. Since then, Youngblood's own interests have expanded into the area of electronic media—especially television—and he's been hard at work on two new books on that topic. Incorporating a decade of research and thought, they'll be published this fall and next year by E.P. Dutton.

Over the last ten years Youngblood has also been writing articles on film, video, and mass communications media for a variety of magazines, and has an ongoing column in the Canadian film journal *Take One*. In addition, he has taught courses and lec-

tured at numerous institutions, ranging from the University of California at Los Angeles to the State University of New York. He has also served adviser to the Rockefeller Foundation's Video Art Program, produced two international conferences on the future of television, and is a member of the selection committee for the Los Angeles International Film Exposition (Filmex).

Youngblood was born in 1942 in Little Rock, Ark. During the 60s he worked professionally in television, radio and newspapers. He lives in Los Angeles, where **Videography** editor Peter Caranicas recorded this interview.

Videography: What are you working on now?

Youngblood: I'm finishing the first volume of a two-volume work. I've been at it for ten years.

Videography: What's it about?

Youngblood: All the new electronic technologies and their implications. I'm calling the first one *The Future of Desire*.

Videography: Do you miss writing about films?

Youngblood: Yes. My interest in the structure of the mass media stems from my past in film. But as a film critic I came to a point where I wanted to make a serious political contribution. And the only way to make such a contribution

in the world of the cinema, I felt, was to remove myself from it and talk about its underlying principles. I suffered a lot from that decision.

Videography: Can you describe *The Future of Desire*?

Youngblood: It's a philosophical and political argument for the reconstruction of the mass media. It puts forth what seems to me to be the most useful and compelling arguments for this reconstruction.

Simultaneously, over these years I've been researching the technology that would make such reconstruction possible. The other volume will be called *The Videosphere* and will be devoted to that technology. I take the argument that the mass media can and should be reconstructed, and I go into very great detail into six areas of technology to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that the claims I make are realistic, that there are no technological or even economic barriers, that the barriers are entirely political and cultural.

Videography: You had an article published in *Co-evolutionary Quarterly* about a year ago...

Youngblood: That was a summary, at that time, of what I call the media argument. That's going to be fleshed out a lot more in the books.

Videography: Well, in that article you talk about a National Information Utility, an organization that would coordinate all media activities on the national level, but you don't specify how it would work, what hardware it would use, and so forth. Can you conceptualize what such a system would entail?

Youngblood: Well, let me say first of all that many of these ideas about the media aren't new, while a whole other part of it is all new. But, the main value of it is the way I'm saying it. For example, the notion that these new technologies hold a revolutionary potential isn't a new one. But I feel the accurate description of that potential has not yet been done. So one of the things I'm trying to do is address the questions of what makes these tools interesting, what is their fascination. Do they make possible certain kinds of social interaction that were impossible before their existence?

Another thing I'm trying to do is politicize the subject. The history of discourse on this subject has been futuristic and institutional. We all grew up reading books about the wonders of satellites. America is permeated with technological utopianism. This has provided some useful metaphors. But my approach is completely political. Even though I started as a media freak back in the 60s, my perspective has changed completely. Now I may still be

a media freak but I'm approaching the subject as a person interested in radical politics, and wondering whether radical politics is viable any more. It seems to me that if radical politics is to be viable at all, it must address itself to these new technologies and their potential for social reconstruction.

So the first thing I'm trying to do is politicize the whole subject of the reconstruction of mass media. I'm trying to push to make reconstruction of the media a mainstream political issue. My opinion is that this may not be possible. But if you could make reconstruction of the mass media an issue that politicians would have to address, you'd pull a thread that wouldn't stop until it unraveled. Again, I'm not sure that it's possible to do that,

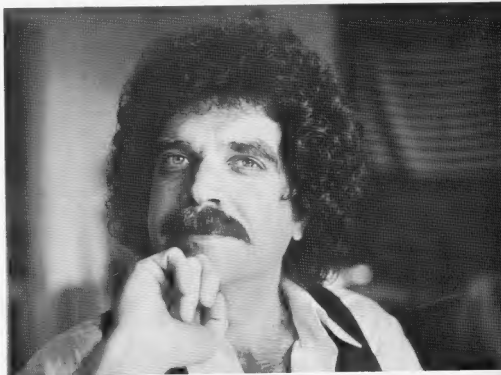
cal activists. When you sit down and prescribe, saying what should be, then I don't see any grounds for calling that futurism. The tools exist now. Now is when we can think about this and say what should be done. And asserting what should be done is a political activity. It has nothing to do with whether you think something actually will be done.

Videography: What does the book advocate as a means of reconstruction of the mass media?

Youngblood: For one thing, abolishment of the principle of broadcasting.

Videography: Do you go into how this could be accomplished?

Youngblood: Yes, in detail. I'm trying to politicize the issue by attacking the principle of broadcasting as a funda-



but it sure is interesting to try.

Videography: Can you be more specific about how it could be made into a hot political issue?

Youngblood: I can only be specific in terms of my personal approach. For example, in the book I'm writing I'm very adamant about rejecting futurism.

Videography: How do you define futurism?

Youngblood: To me, futurism is an attitude that's predictive rather than prescriptive. The futurists, whoever they are, may well be interested in the same things I am, but there's a vast difference in the way they're interested, in how they talk about them. Futurists may argue with this and claim that they're prescriptive too, but in that case I claim that they cease to be futurists at that point—they become politi-

mental menace, regardless of content.

Videography: Well, would you do away with the whole apparatus of broadcasting as it exists in the world today?

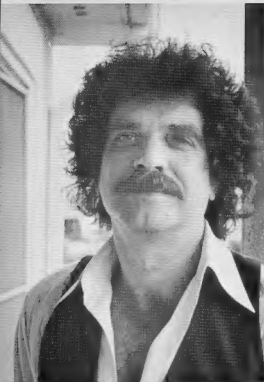
Youngblood: Yes.

Videography: Then how would you disseminate the information that's now broadcast?

Youngblood: Well, let me put this another way. I think that the ultimate significance of new communications technologies is that they could replace present ones.

Videography: But do you think broadcasting will just wither away as new technologies arise, or will it be pushed aside by legislation or other means?

Youngblood: I don't predict. I know what I think should happen. I know



"Making the transition from broadcasting to cablecasting is the main political issue for the rest of the century."

that I think all television should be done through cable. You see, if you try to politicize something you run into the problem of how to do it without offending large numbers of people. You're guaranteed to offend mass numbers of your critique content. I don't take a critical attitude with regard to content. I'm for any kind of content. Fine. All I'm proposing is that it all be done by cable.

Videography: Is cable's main advantage its multiplicity of channels?

Youngblood: Yes. Cable, like all of the new technologies holds potential for undermining the mass-audience principle in audiovisual communications. Computers, satellites, disc, cassette, portable recording—their ultimate and universal interest is that they intrinsically imply the transformation of mass-audience into special-audience communication.

Videography: Are you also talking about two-way communications?

Youngblood: One of the things I am trying to do is discuss what is meant by two-way, and identify which interpretations of two-way are not important. I'm trying to zero in on what is two-way. How much two-way do you really need to realize the benefits of two-way? There are several ways that you can talk about two-way. You could talk about it in terms of telephone, where the very system you use to re-

ceive something is also used to send something. Exactly the same carrier, with the same markers and encoding techniques. That's one interpretation of two-way.

Videography: Well, the telephone is two-way, but it is not really for reaching mass audiences.

Youngblood: It could be, with some modifications of the switching system. Which is what I propose for video. Let's just assume, for fantasy's sake, that you have a hundred tv channels. You couldn't have a hundred tv channels actually working and operating and still have a centralized mass culture as we now know it. It is an either/or situation. Either you maintain a centralized mass culture, or you do not.

Videography: But say you had your hundred channels, wouldn't there still be three or four dominant ones? Just like the magazine industry—you have Time and Newsweek and a few other large ones.

Youngblood: Perhaps. But I am not so sure that Time and Newsweek would have the power that they have were it not for television having the power that it has. So if you could imagine a world in which the single voice of television is replaced by a multitude of voices, some of which are bigger than others, but none of which is anywhere near as big as the voice of television that exists now, we can't imagine what that would be like. But I'll tell you one thing. After studying this technology for a long time, my opinion is that the telephone company should wire the nation. It should not be the cable industry.

Videography: What do you think of the cable industry today, and its expansion via pay tv?

Youngblood: I think they are the only directions that could be expected. I think of all of the new technologies, cable is the most problematic. In other words, all of the others will have a major impact on our culture long before cable does. Especially satellites, discs and cassettes. In fact, what I am trying to push hard in this book, is that the issue of cable is a political issue. To systematically and by policy make a transition from broadcasting to cablecasting is a political decision. This is, in my opinion, the political issue for the rest of the century, or however long it takes to do it.

Videography: Well, I can imagine a cabled society not very different from the broadcasters' society that we have now. You could have 30 cable channels and still have the major networks dominating the television scene.

Youngblood: That is imaginable. But first of all, the telephone company should do it, because under those circumstances, you wouldn't have 30

channels, you would have 200 million.

Videography: In other words, one for every person?

Youngblood: If a particular kind of optical fiber is used and if it is structured in a particular way, then you have a hub-switched, decentralized, user-controlled principle of the network. There is already such a network existing. It is the phone system. Now, that system does have three inadequacies. One, you can only speak to one person at a time. So it is not a political tool. Second, it only processes audio information, not visual information, therefore it is pretty inadequate as a tool for what I call the cultivation of alternative models of possible reality. In other words, what I see as one of the most interesting, inevitable applications of the new tools is for people to hold before themselves alternative models of ways of living. To do this in any way that is politically interesting, you need visuals. And the third inadequacy of the present phone-line system is that for most people it has no memory or storage or retrieval.

Videography: Well, if you add a few minor features to the telephone system, you could have machines like that.

Youngblood: Yes I know. In principle, you are correct. And that third feature may not even be that important, given the rise of home computers. But the point I am trying to make is that a really revolutionary technology namely, microelectronic switching systems, could make the telephone system operate as either one-to-one or one-to-many.

Videography: I don't see how that could be.

Youngblood: Very simple. Today we have all of our lines going into the one central switcher. There is only a single switcher; my line is connected to yours at that switch. Therefore, anyone who wants to talk to me or you at that time gets a busy signal. The new technology duplicates that same switcher for every line. Every line has its own switcher. That means I can plug into you at my switch, this person can plug into you at his switch, this other person can plug into you at her switch, and so on. Every line has its own dedicated switch. This has already been in operation by Rediffusion International in England, which is wiring a town in Holland. They also wired in the early 70s a town on Long Island.

Videography: So what can I do if I live in a town like that, besides call you up?

Youngblood: The new technology that exists makes possible the following: your home terminal, let's say, would have three buttons, and these are three different modes of operat-

ing, of how the system is going to function for you, determined by how you want it to function at the time. You push one button, and you are speaking on the telephone, in a manner exactly like you do now. No one else can hear. You push another button, and it is "videophone," one-to-one. You push another button, and you are, let us say, broadcasting. In other words, you have your tape recorder, you plug in the thing and you are putting out a signal. And anyone who wants to patch into that signal can.

Videography: How do they know, or how do you inform them you will be broadcasting at that time?

Youngblood: There are various ways. For example, an indexing channel. A both print and electronic guide which could be updated every minute.

Another way of doing it is that you could just dial up the program source that you wanted. But let's say that by federal or local policy or whatever, there would be 100 public access channels set up, all of them dedicated to particular subjects, or particular categories of subjects. World news, local news, French films, education. And everyone could program these channels on a first-come, first-served basis.

Videography: Everyone in the

country? Or everyone in a city or town that is wired?

Youngblood: These are details that can be worked out. The principle is that all of them would be public access channels insofar as you would not be charged for getting on them, and insofar as you addressed the subject to which they were dedicated. There could be other channels which would not be accessible like that, for which you would have to pay, which would have to be leased, entrepreneurial channels. We're really talking about a hundred billion dollars. Today we've got the telephone company, the data-transmission companies, the cable-television industry, all duplicating what the phone company could do if it made a few changes.

Videography: Yes, but the cable television companies are not solely common carriers.

Youngblood: No, not yet. But we all know that they will be. At some point, if the cable companies are to really start competing, and really providing more, they are going to have to start imitating what the phone company is doing.

Videography: Well, there are a number of dangers. First of all, the phone company is one corporation,

"There have been two times in history to enter the movie business—one was in 1890, the other is now."

and if you allow it to wire the nation, won't it in a sense control it? This is one of the things that people are concerned about.

Youngblood: This comes up all the time. I think it is a reasonable concern. I am trying to specify the appropriate political attitude about that question. Television must be operated as a common carrier and a public utility. I don't care if Hitler himself owns it, so long as it is operated as a public utility.

Videography: If you set up a mass communications system like the one you described that incorporated cable and television and two-way and everything else, how would it be financed? Would the subscribers pay on the basis of use? Or would they get a monthly bill?

Youngblood: Again, the ideas here are not new, they are methods which are already in use and there would have to be some combination of them. The possibilities include commercial sponsorship, individual subscription, public support. And whatever else, maybe grants.

Videography: There would be a certain amount of advertising?

Youngblood: I'm not interested in predicting things like this, I am interested in addressing the implications of these things. If there were sufficient commercial-free channels, paid by subscriptions, then commercials on the other channels would be okay. As long as there are alternatives, as long as television is not just one phenomenon, and you could opt out of that one particular way and do something else, that is fine, I have no objection. My only objection to television is that there is no choice whatsoever. The principle of broadcasting just wipes out the question of choice in any politically relevant sense. And that is just not human.

Videography: How do you think the advent of home video recording is going to change television?

Youngblood: I think the Betamax and the other machines merely make your participation in the centralized mass media more convenient for you. But it doesn't in any way get you out of the mass culture and into some alternative kinds of cultural activities. Only when there are channels all of the time, 24 hours per day, no matter where you are, such that you can still

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dial a channel that would be describing the world in a very different way from what the world is now described, and you could return to that channel continuously, anytime you wanted to participate in that discourse—that is when it becomes politically important.

Videography: So in other words, home video recording isn't making all that many changes.

Youngblood: Not yet, but it certainly has the potential. One day there will be movie publishing. It'll be an industry like the magazine and record industries, and will allow you sufficient choice. It will be like going into a book store and having all those "channels" from which to choose. And there might be a whole shelf—50 books—addressing the same subject, all from different points of view. By selecting a book, or videocassette, you really select your world.

Videography: How do you think home video will change the movie industry?

Youngblood: In many ways. Ultimately, I want to produce. There have been two times in history to enter the movie business. One was around 1900, the other is right now.

Videography: Why now?

Youngblood: It's being redefined by distribution.

Videography: And home video is part of the new distribution system?

Youngblood: Yes. It's being reorganized in a way that will make it possible for me to participate. I'm not the kind of person who could deal with Hollywood. But by reinventing distribution, they're reinventing the medium.

Videography: How do you feel about the distribution of video programs that might have advertising on them?

Youngblood: Advertising in and of itself isn't bad. My objection to advertising is that it is applied to the support of mass centralized broadcasting. If you could still have advertising in specialized ways, no objection.

Videography: Can you conceive, for instance, of a videotape on carpentry which contains commercials for a certain manufacturer's tool?

Youngblood: Right. Most fantasies about the use of all of these new technologies are about making the present system more efficient, basically. They are not really about change. My excitement about new tools is that they are capable of fundamental change. And I don't think you could have said this about any other tools before.

One of the ways that I am trying to politicize this subject is to speak of reality-communities. Which is my word for what other people call special-interest groups. A special-interest

audience is not necessarily an alternative reality. But it is realistic to conceive of alternative reality communities based on the new technologies.

A reality-community is like a culture. The Iranian culture, the French culture, etc. As we all know, people in different cultures lead very different lives, relate differently. If these new video tools get used a lot, if their full potential is anywhere near realized, it is almost inevitable that the rise of alternative reality communities will come about in America.

For example, in one reality, men

and women live together in a particular way. In monogamous, sexually closed, jealousy-based manipulative relationships. As we all know, since the 60s, these things have been under attack by various thinkers, so there is clearly a movement in this country, and everywhere else, toward redefining human relations. I think that this urge can be aided and abetted in a very important way through decentralized user-controlled, special-audience communications.

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relationships. On this channel you would use the same semiotic strategies that are now used in broadcasting. You would have to use the same techniques of filming drama and other genres in order to validate a very different world view. In this world, men and women live together in more or less open relationships, nonmonogamous. They perhaps would be jealous, but they would at least be dealing with it. This detrializes the subject of human relations.

The present structure not only discourages but actually prevents the springing forth of new cultural realities. And what is needed to solve the serious problems of modern society, urban problems, quality-of-life problems, technological and military problems, is resocialization. I think that the problems we have now are not being solved because of the way we are being socialized. And we are being socialized primarily by the centralized mass media. But I don't think that resocialization is incompatible with capitalism. It is certainly compatible with the professed goals of our democracy. And here's an opportunity for America to put its money where its mouth is, by investing in new technology that will make a more complete

democracy possible.

Videoigraphy: How does present-day tv relate to democracy?

Younghood: Television is the epitome of industrialization. It is the principle of industrialization taken to the outer extreme. Industrial managers have always been in charge of the production of goods. Now, through the rise of the mass media, they are in charge of producing the cultural environment wherein the desire for those goods can be cultivated.

And what is really significant is what they don't produce. Because you can't desire what isn't there. They control desire by attenuation. The general notion of alienation is that you do something because you don't have anything else to do.

Videoigraphy: You don't hold much hope for public tv?

Younghood: They are broadcasters. Cable has great possibilities. But public broadcasting is still communication, not conversation.

Videoigraphy: You were talking about special groups, subcultures, that would be given a sense of community via television. Would that also be the case if these groups bought software, in videodiscs and cassettes?

Younghood: Yes, I think that it is al-

most inevitable that disc and cassette will get to the point. Video publishing will get to the point where it is like book publishing. And they are very much complimentary. I think video publishing would enhance book publishing. It would diminish broadcasting. But I don't think we can expect the kind of revolution without the abolition of broadcasting. There might still be some broadcasting, but only if the predominant use of television is by cable will the full potential of these tools be realized.

Videoigraphy: Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic that a lot of these changes will come about?

Younghood: I feel completely out of touch with the world. I don't think I know anything about the world anymore. I'm happy. But predicting the future isn't possible. If I find myself optimistic, I stop and think why, and I have no answer. The same with pessimism. But I would definitely like to see changes.

Videoigraphy: What do you think of Jerry Mander's book which argued for the elimination of television altogether?

Younghood: Not much. With friends like him, who needs enemies. I think that his kind of approach to the subject is destructive of any kind of viable political action precisely because of the ground he chooses to stand on. He knows what is real, he knows what is right, he has this absolute, extreme point-of-view, he has access to the truth and reality. And clearly, no one else does, especially in television. And if television is to be proper, we have to do what he says. And then he goes on to say that it is incapable of that. He takes the elitist, objective—reality point of view, and he is a vitalist. He claims that in the actual physical properties of television there are qualities such as good and bad. That's crazy. That's like claiming that in protein there is life. Mander uses the very argument that there exists an objective truth and reality. He says he knows what it is. That is precisely the argument on which centralized mass publishing is based in the first place. Only under such circumstances can you have a single channel speaking to everyone, which is how I see the media—speaking with a single voice, determined by a single common denominator. Mander is an example of the very thing he's criticizing, the same principle that allows a Cronkite to say to 200 million people, "That's the way it is."

Videoigraphy: When will your book be published?

Younghood: Late this fall.

Videoigraphy: Thank you, Gene Younghood.

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